Address by Dr. Gwang-Jo Kim  
Director, UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education  
on the Occasion of the 124th Session of the  
General Assembly of the Japanese National Commission for  
UNESCO  

Monday, 9 March 2009

Honorable Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Mr Hirokazu Matsuno,  
Honorable Chairperson, Mr Tetsuo Tamura,  
Esteemed Secretary-General, Mr Isao Kiso,  
Distinguished members of the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO,  
Ladies and gentlemen.

Let me first express my sincere gratitude to you for inviting me to address this very important assembly, and take this opportunity to introduce myself to all of you.

My name is Gwang-Jo Kim, from the Republic of Korea and I am the newly-appointed Director of UNESCO Bangkok. Before I joined this Organization – in fact, throughout my professional life – education and development have been the area of my vocation. In 1995, I served at the Office of the President of the Republic of Korea as adviser in the fields of education and social policy to former President Young Sam. This was followed by my affiliation with the World Bank in
2001 as Senior Education Specialist at its Headquarters in Washington, D.C. during which I worked on education projects which included the preparation of lending schemes and delivery of technical assistance. In 2004, I returned to my country and was appointed Director-General of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development. From 2005 to 2008, I was Deputy-Minister in the same Ministry, charged with leading policy development in the areas of higher education, technical and vocational education, lifelong learning and human resources development. Following this trajectory, it seemed almost predictable that my next job would still be in the field of education.

Today, as I stand here before you as Director of UNESCO’s Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, I could not seem to find the most appropriate words to convey the feeling of being deeply honored and equally overwhelmed: deeply honored for the opportunity given to me to address this unique gathering of distinguished men and women from different fields and backgrounds but who share the same passion for, and interest in UNESCO’s mandate. And I am overwhelmed by the generosity of the Government of Japan and the Japanese people who, over the years, have been providing much-needed support to UNESCO and its programmes. It is a clear demonstration of Japan’s strong commitment to UNESCO’s ideals and everything it stands for.
Before I get to the heart of my intervention, please also allow me to seek your patience and understanding should my address today fall short of your expectations. As I was preparing this speech, it occurred to me how relevant the experience of attending this gathering is to one of UNESCO’s goals – lifelong learning! I have decided then to consider this occasion as one valuable learning experience, just as I consider this as a way of strengthening the relationship that exists between Japan and UNESCO. The relationship I would like to pursue, and hope to achieve, is one that is based on open and frank exchange of views, the sharing of ideas and continuous dialogue; a relationship that is even stronger than it has ever been in the past, and beneficial to both UNESCO on the one hand, and the Government of Japan, the Japanese National Commission, and the Japanese people on the other.

**UNESCO – An Overview**

As you all know, UNESCO has been mandated by its Member States to carry out programmes and activities in five different, but equally important areas: Education, Natural Sciences, Social and Human Sciences, Culture, and Communication and Information. At the regional level and particularly at UNESCO Bangkok, these mandates are reflected in the same five areas I just mentioned, with various programmes and activities established upon the request of Member States to address their specific needs.
At the core of UNESCO’s mandate is the Education for All (EFA) with six goals to be achieved by 2015. Launched in 1990 in Thailand, the six goals pertain to early childhood care and education, universal primary education, life skills and lifelong learning, literacy, gender equality in education, and quality education. The right to education continues to be at the very heart of UNESCO’s mission. This human rights-based approach to education, anchored in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, advocates the view that every person is born with a human right to education and therefore all people should enjoy equal educational opportunities.

While EFA provides the moral and political foundation for ensuring learning opportunities for all individuals without discrimination, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) offers a vision of education in order to reach our potentials and benefit our societies by balancing human well-being with cultural traditions and respect for natural resources. As lead agency for the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, UNESCO promotes ESD as central to quality education and advocates for the integration of the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning.

In the rapidly changing Asia-Pacific region, UNESCO plays a unique role in mitigating the negative aspects of globalization while promoting sustainable social and economic development based on a
strategy that maximizes each community’s distinctive assets of cultural and human capital. UNESCO’s work in the region includes the development of award-winning models for eco-tourism (which can be applied for sustainable development of World Heritage sites), the capacity-building of heritage managers and tourism professionals (such as heritage guides), and the promotion of cultural industries, to name just a few.

In an effort to develop and promote social policies that uphold peace and human rights, UNESCO has entered into partnership with many organizations and institutions in the region to develop priority programmes in bioethics and the ethics of science technologies, communication technology, and the use of ICT, all of which have linkages to all five programme areas of the Organization.

In carrying out many of the activities I just mentioned, UNESCO Headquarters and Field Offices around the world have benefited from the Government of Japan’s generous contributions through its Funds-in-Trust (JFIT) programmes. Last year alone, JFIT contributed nearly $13 million to UNESCO. In particular, UNESCO Bangkok Office has been the privileged recipient of JFIT contributions, which account for one-third of the total extra-budgetary funding this Office currently manages. Moreover, 60% of the extra-budgetary funding for its education projects comes from Japan. In this regard, I would like to acknowledge Japan’s longstanding support, in particular to literacy
and non-formal education, which are vital to our region’s educational development but have not received much support from other donors. Japan further demonstrated the great importance it gives to literacy and EFA by offering $15 million ODA contribution to Afghanistan through UNESCO Kabul Office in support of that country’s massive literacy programme.

Certainly, the leadership of your distinguished compatriot, UNESCO Director-General Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, has been playing a pivotal role in ensuring that other areas are given the same importance by mobilizing Japan’s support and cooperation for capacity development of human resources, as well as the protection of the world cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage.

The Challenges

Despite all these efforts, however, a number of challenges remain – both internal and external to the Organization – that will likely derail the objectives and prevent us from achieving the goals we have set. For example, UNESCO has to work harder to help the Member States achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – though not all of them address the direct mandate of UNESCO.

In the area of education, achieving EFA remains a major challenge in many countries of the world. Even in the wealthiest countries, there
are underserved groups of individuals whose learning needs remain unmet and potentials are not realized. Without EFA, there is no development; research has shown that the economic success of countries in this region, such as post-war Japan or South Korea, was not possible without mass education. But the human dimension of development is also important because without education, there is no individual empowerment.

Then there are global factors that contribute to this challenge. For example, the disastrous effects of increasing food prices and rising economic uncertainties were further aggravated by high unemployment rates, even among the highly-educated individuals, as a result of the current global financial crisis. These factors have serious adverse impact on the progress being made, and the projection of achievements to be made, in achieving EFA.

Traditionally, public investment in social services such as education and health are the first to suffer in the time of economic crisis. Given the relatively large direct and indirect costs of schooling for poor families, increased family poverty level may lead parents to pull out or keep children – especially girls – out of school. They are then forced to work to contribute to family income. This was exactly what happened in many of the countries hit by the 1997-1998 Asian economic crisis: in Indonesia, secondary school enrolment dropped by 11%, in the Philippines by 8%, and in Thailand overall enrollment
dropped nearly 9%. Therefore, although it is too early to measure the impact of the current food price increase and the global financial crisis may have on children’s schooling in the region, historical experiences from the post-1997 financial crisis provide us with valid reasons to be more prepared.1

In addition, natural disasters and emergencies due to climate change strike our planet with increasing force and frequency. As their threats to the sustainability of World Heritage properties in the Asia-Pacific grow, so is their negative impact on people whose livelihoods depend on tourism. In many parts of the region, man-made disasters caused by nationalism and other forms of extremism put vulnerable minority and other marginalized groups in great danger. Preventing these groups from obtaining education or depriving them of their livelihoods and sources of income because of religious, political, cultural or social differences will perpetuate the inhuman situation they find themselves in.

The Opportunities

These challenges, of course, should not be a source of pessimism; rather the contrary. In fact, the word ‘crisis’ in both our languages –

---

1 “Impact of the economic crisis on education”, draft working paper prepared by Professor Ka Ho Mok, The University of Hong Kong, for UNICEF Conference on East Asia and the Pacific Islands, 6-7 January 2009, Singapore.
Japanese and Korean – which is “危機 (ki-ki in Japanese)”, implies that challenges or danger can also be turned into “opportunities”. It means that if we are able to clearly identify and properly seize these opportunities, we will be able to mitigate some, if not most, of the issues and challenges mentioned earlier. For example, the EFA Mid-Decade Assessment in the region has led to further initiatives in the countries to rigorously review their education sector policies and strategies in light of their overall national development priorities. This meant linking and integrating the education sector strategies more closely with poverty reduction strategies and socio-economic and political development needs. The last several years have also seen a rapid growth in the countries’ awareness of the importance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and its critical role in laying the foundation for all future learning. Many countries have initiated a process of a comprehensive review of policies regarding early childhood and leading a more holistic framework policy for ECCE and movement towards integrating one or two years of pre-primary education as part of their primary education system or making it compulsory.

In the area of poverty reduction and to contribute to the achievement of related MDGs, UNESCO has developed award-winning models for eco-tourism which can be applied for sustainable development of World Heritage sites. Programmes on heritage management, planning for disaster risk reduction, as well as the mobilization of local
communities bode well for sustainable tourism. All these actions and initiatives provide excellent opportunities that we must take to help the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

**Moving Forward**

The effects of the financial crisis are now strongly felt in many countries. For many of them, maintaining their commitments to internationally agreed development goals, such as the MDGs and EFA, has become a major challenge. As far as UNESCO is concerned, it must advocate and monitor the countries’ efforts for EFA and beyond – especially at such crucial times – in order to defend the right of every person to quality education. At the same time, all stakeholders must unite in solidarity, support each other, and reach out across all sectors and share innovative ideas with all countries and partners across the region.

So, the question that must be asked therefore is: Where do we go from here?

Since our strategies are formulated in consultation with the Member States, addressing their needs are of paramount importance. But as global political and economic conditions change at such an incredibly fast pace, we usually find ourselves incapable or ill-equipped to attend to those needs. With 60% of the world’s population of diverse
cultures, languages and religions, living in countries of different sizes under various degrees of development and under-development, the Asia-Pacific region is unique in more ways than one. But in this age of globalization, many countries find themselves affected – for good or bad – by other countries’ actions regardless of the intention. This is true in the case of the current financial crisis. The problems that began and first manifested in most of the developed world have now spread to aggravate the economic situation of developing countries in the region: rising prices of commodities, increasing unemployment rates and worsening poverty situation, to cite just a few. These problems need to be addressed and UNESCO should assist in the formulation of strategies to help countries prepare the relevant policies.

**Vision for UNESCO Bangkok**

Let me share with you the vision I have for UNESCO Bangkok with regard to its role in the implementation of programmes and activities in the region, and the challenges it faces in addressing the needs of its 46 Member States, against the backdrop of dire global economic and political conditions. While I do not foresee any deviations from our long-established sets of goals or a sudden shift in our priorities, I believe there is an urgent need to rethink, and re-adjust our strategy. Whenever possible, we will focus on a few major issues that affect us all, and propose concrete actions to cushion the impact on the neediest and most vulnerable segments of the region’s population.
My vision for UNESCO Bangkok will revolve around “**EFA and Beyond for Sustainable Development**”.

The EFA Mid-Decade Assessment in the Asia and Pacific region (2005-2008) for which Japan has provided crucial support, has brought to light the need to address disparities in education. It has alerted decision-makers on the need for greater policy attention on the unreached, underserved and disadvantaged groups in education and to make political commitment to ensuring that these groups have access to quality education and achieve learning outcomes.

But while many countries may be far from achieving EFA, the region must also see the world **beyond basic education for all**. As many countries achieve high levels of literacy and primary or secondary education completion, the demand for higher levels of education have increased dramatically. It is recognised that the bases of globalisation are information and innovation which are highly knowledge-intensive. Therefore, education plays an even more crucial role today, as the wealth distribution between and within countries are increasingly determined by the ability to produce knowledge and process information.

In this knowledge-intensive society, where certain kinds of knowledge become obsolete very quickly and need to be updated
constantly, the importance of “learning to learn” cannot be emphasised enough. Moreover, other skills such as creative problem-solving skills, critical thinking, scientific and social literacy, and commitment to the well-being of others and society as a whole, must be also cultivated, so that each individual is capable of pursuing his or her personal as well as societal development. In this context, higher education as well as research and development are indispensable along with the provision for citizens to learn throughout life.

What is also implied here is the paramount importance of the expansion of the provision of comprehensive early childhood care and education on the one hand, and the quality improvement of teacher education, on the other, so that teachers are capable of facilitating learners to acquire these skills and capacities from very early ages in life. I am quite certain that Japan has a lot to offer in these areas for the rest of the region.

Having laid down my vision, I will now work with my staff and other colleagues as well as partners in the region to develop and formulate plans to achieve that vision. Now more than ever, UNESCO Bangkok will need all the support it can have to realize what we’re aiming for.

In the next few days, I will be calling on some of you personally, and use that opportunity to further discuss issues of common interests, identify potential areas for collaboration, and to try to further
strengthen our ties. Due to fears arising out of the expected negative effects of the economic crisis on the overall quest for fresh sources of funds, various sectors have expressed a serious concern – **unfounded, I hope** – that UNESCO will go down a few steps lower in the list of priorities of many donor countries, including Japan, since those countries will instead focus their attention and shift resources towards addressing domestic economic problems.

However, we should not limit our definition and therefore our search, of resources to “financial” alone. As mentioned previously, Japan has a lot to offer in terms of providing technical assistance in various fields including research and development. The challenges we face are serious and numerous; addressing them will require the mobilization of all available resources. UNESCO cannot tackle those issues alone and that we need partnerships and cohesive actions if we are to succeed in our endeavors. I hope that you will give me an opportunity to build on the long and extraordinary partnership we have to realize my vision for UNESCO Bangkok.

Before closing, I understand that there will be a question-and-answer (Q&A) portion following my speech. I can assure you that I will answer all questions as best as I possibly can, but there may be questions that I can only properly answer after consulting with relevant staff in UNESCO Bangkok.
Let me conclude by thanking you all once again for your continuing support to UNESCO, and for giving me this opportunity to address your assembly.

Thank you!